

*Active Agents versus Passive Victims:  
Decolonized Historiography or Problematic  
Paradigm?*

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Analysis itself becomes politics; interpretation acquires the undertones of a polemic . . . marking our own text with the signs of battle.

PARTHA CHATTERJEE, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*

A dominant paradigm can facilitate the synthesis of multiple pasts into a historical narrative. It can also marginalize or suppress dissident voices. I have lived long enough to see such paradigms come and go, and implicate each other, until I wonder: at what point can we agree that Pacific Islands history has decolonized? It takes two to decolonize; one side gets free, the other lets go. But if colonialism is like an unequal marriage, then decolonization is the messy divorce—complete with disputes over property, alimony, visitation rights, and allegations of abuse. Considering that less than half the countries in the Pacific Islands today are sovereign, independent states, the entanglement between colonizers and colonized may last well into the twenty-first century.

Historiography is, in a sense, the last colonial frontier, a kind of dysfunctional family reunion. Whom should the next generation believe: the paternalistic excolonizer or the unleashed native? For example, does representing Pacific Islanders as active agents in their own past, rather than as passive victims simply acted on by outsiders, really demonstrate that Pacific Islands history has decolonized—particularly when indigenous

nationalists continue to protest about what outsiders have perpetrated against their peoples? I like the idea of active agency, but like any chosen emphasis, it can screen out subversive data. As Klaus Neumann has pointed out, "Whereas histories that highlight fatal impacts and legacies of conquest project our present interests onto earlier generations, holding *them* firmly responsible, [island-centered history] allows us to use the other's past as a means of diverting attention from our *own*" (Neumann 1994, 123, my italics). I would add that, if favoring native choice-making and participation commands paradigmatic status, to the relative neglect of evidence on depopulation or colonial exploitation, then hegemony, however altruistic, lives on.

I came to Pacific history from African history, which was a relatively new academic field in the 1960s—a hasty response to the "decolonization" of forty countries on the second largest continent in the world. "Africanists," as we were called, were busily trying to prove Hugh Trevor-Roper wrong. He had made the notorious claim that history in Africa was only the record of European actions; the rest was darkness, which was not the proper subject of history (Trevor-Roper 1963). By the time I joined the Africanist enterprise, Jan Vansina was breaking revolutionary ground with his use of indigenous oral traditions, computers had helped linguists to trace the migrations of the Bantu, new evidence was emerging from archaeology, ethnobotany, and Arabic records, and European accounts were being reinterpreted with an emphasis on African initiative and resistance to domination. Philip Curtin did studies of the Atlantic slave trade that reduced the numbers of victims and empowered the chiefs who sold captives to Europeans, and a new generation of African historians, led by Jacob Ajayi of Nigeria (1969), argued that colonialism had been more ephemeral than oppressive.

Yet the frequent political or economic crises in newly "independent" African states raised questions about the lingering impact of colonialism. As Vietnam-era protests made Marxism more popular, radical critiques found a wider following. Walter Rodney argued that Europe had knowingly "underdeveloped" Africa (1972), and Kwame Nkrumah called neo-colonialism the "last stage of imperialism" (1965). While these works were overtly polemical, scholars too found that colonial legacies continued to act on Africa. Immanuel Wallerstein's "world system" theory evolved from his disillusionment over the failure of "national integration" in many multiethnic African states.<sup>1</sup> My own personal encounters

with Africa were affected by these competing paradigms. In 1967, I went to West Africa with a student group, looking for signs of “modernity,” and found them. When I went back as a US Peace Corps teacher in 1968, I felt more alienated and wanted to rediscover African “traditions.” I found plenty. On my third visit, *after* my MA in African history, I finally realized that Africans would mix outside influences with their own heritage in ways that defied my tidy categories.

In the late 1980s, I began to study Pacific history at the University of Hawai‘i, after several years of living in the region. I was taught to avoid a “colonial” perspective by directing my studies toward the actions of native people themselves. This “islander-oriented” approach made good sense to me, and as a former Africanist, I liked the idea of using oral traditions and emphasizing Islander resistance to outside domination. Yet I was also taught that “fatal impact” or Marxist accounts were as inappropriate as old-fashioned imperial history, because in their own ways, they too turned Islanders into inert victims who were only acted on by intruders. In an age of decolonization, revisionist historians were supposed to “upstream” self-determination backward through time. As J W Davidson of the Australian National University had first suggested (1955), studies of “interaction” between multiple agents on both sides of the cultural beach would reveal that Islanders had not only participated in their own histories (Howe 1984, xiii) but even helped to “shape” colonialism, choosing their actions through a rational “cost-benefit analysis” (Hempenstall 1975). Now that western-trained elites were trying to build “nations” within inherited colonial structures, it was quite timely for outsider academics, who practically monopolized Pacific studies, to bestow the “gift of agency.”

Supposedly objective scholars wrote partisan testimonials to native virtues. “Fatal impact” was said to ignore how “adaptable, resourceful, and resilient” island societies could be: “To see Islanders as passive, helpless, and always persecuted and suffering at the hands of Europeans . . . denies Islanders their humanity” (Howe 1984, 350–352). Despite legal claims being made by Melanesians in Australia that their ancestors had been “blackbirded” in the nineteenth century labor trade, a revisionist wrote, “It is demeaning to the intelligence of the Melanesian people to presume that they presented themselves to be kidnapped from the same beaches on the same islands, generation following generation” (Moore 1985, 47). In a study of Indian recruits for Fiji plantations, Brij Lal argued, “the

migrants do not always appear as helpless victims of external forces . . . but also as actors in their own right" (1983, 129). This empowering sentiment was expressed in other decolonizing histories.<sup>2</sup> Bruce Trigger, a Huron Indian specialist, wrote, "It is tempting to portray native North Americans in sombre tones as the victims of unremitting European self-interest. . . . Yet such a view fails to acknowledge the tenacity with which native peoples . . . continued to defend their lands, customs, and personal dignity" (1985, 297).

Ironically, tragic narratives still haunted the new millennium. In the 1970s, anti-French Kanak radicals in New Caledonia (and sympathetic scholars) treated the 1878 revolt against France as a precursor to the modern struggle for independence and portrayed decapitated Chief Atai as a national hero (Anova-Ataba 1969; Guiart 1968; Dousset 1970). An "Islander-oriented" historian debunked this mythmaking, arguing that the 1878 uprising was really more of a civil war in which the French happened to be involved, than a case of "national" resistance to foreign imperialism (Latham 1975). The ensuing debate evoked a well-reasoned mediation from Bronwen Douglas, who criticized simplistic labels but also suggested, "The interpretation of indigenous violence towards Europeans solely in terms of local patterns of alliance and hostility tends to ignore the wider colonial context" (1980, 23). Michel Panoff (1979) criticized what he called the "Canberra school" of history, for overemphasizing voluntarism and paternalism in nineteenth century Melanesian labor recruitment, instead of kidnapping and exploitation. Ron Adams (1986, 41) countered that the differences between Panoff's class orientation and the Australian National University's "culture contact" approach existed more "at the semantic rather than the interpretative level."<sup>3</sup> Yet ni-Vanuatu nationalists, like their Kanak neighbors, wrote about "ruthless" sandalwooders, "blackbirders," and "planters acquiring land by fair means and foul" (Molisa, Vurubaravu, and Van Trease 1982, 84).

Such word wars show that historians themselves are actors in the theater of collective memory. Cross-cultural gifts like "agency" come encrusted with subtexts and can, in new contexts, be resignified. Was it possible to abuse Islander agency, by disempowering colonizers in the past in order to rehabilitate their legitimacy in the present? The Africanist in me heard Nkrumah warning that colonialism did not necessarily end with independence. Indeed, Epeli Hau'ofa was criticizing a western-educated South Pacific ruling elite for maintaining closer ties to foreign aid-donors



than to their own island constituencies: “the poor merely struggle to survive and scrounge for what they can get from the effluent of the affluent” (1987, 11). Vilsoni Hereniko has likened the castrated coconut trees of Waikīkī to neutered Pacific identities—and not only tourism neuters cultures: “The term *post-colonial* is problematic as there are evidences of neo-colonial practices even in independent or self-governing nations” (1994, 417). This lingering hegemony, he said, explains the essentialist stance of many Islander nationalists, who seek “to symbolise cultural autonomy, real or imagined” (1994, 424).

In defiance of revisionist altruism, indigenous Pacific nationalists often employ the passive voice and the victim image in their protests against past injustices. Kanaks, for example, have debated whether to grant voting rights to fellow “victims of history,” such as the descendants of French convicts or Asian indentured laborers (Ward 1988, 100–101). Nor is the term *victim* needed for the idea of victimization to empower angry rhetoric. Hawaiian Studies Director Haunani-Kay Trask still writes “done-to” history, as in, “our country was stolen, along with our citizenship, our lands and our independent place among the family of nations” (1993, 2). Although a very active agent herself, she went on to say, “my people had been dispossessed of our religion, our moral order, our form of chiefly government” (7), “the Hawaiian universe collapsed under the impact of mass death” (21), and Hawai‘i was “transformed by the American behemoth into a dying land. Only a whispering spirit remains” (25). Her own “whispers” include a compelling account of outsider-induced depopulation, dispossession, deculturation, and touristic commodification, combined, in a very causal way, with the story of Hawaiian activism since the 1970s (Trask 1987).

I asked myself, should such outspoken nationalists simply be dismissed as political organizers, whose quest for emotive, mobilizing issues makes it impossible for them to dialogue with “serious” scholars who understand the true “complexity” of history? But then, how could a decolonized history, which purports to empower Islanders, clash with native activists who talk back in unpleasant, ungrateful ways? The very notion that Pacific Islands history had to be reoriented toward the islands was clearly an outsider perception, a corrective change that would be unnecessary for Islanders themselves—unless they had been socialized by their overseas educations into thinking like westerners. “Islander-oriented” history began to sound pretty feeble when confronted with *Islander* his-

tory. One solution was to call the nationalist rhetoric inauthentic, because it showed postcontact influences, but that tactic only widened the gap between natives and self-proclaimed “decolonizers.”<sup>4</sup> Were the latter trying too hard to impose their own academic standards—and hence hegemony—on indigenous discourses? Perhaps. Or was the paradigm of “active agent versus passive victim” itself too artificial a construct to encompass everything that Pacific Islanders wanted to address?

Although not always explicitly stated, the agent–victim opposition runs through modern Pacific historiography. In reflections on the first few decades of the field, Kerry Howe (1992, 1994) has suggested that lingering romanticism limited most revisionism to writing Islanders into “culture contact” stories—a function more antiquarian than relevant to contemporary political contexts. Liberation struggles in other regions such as Africa or Asia generated sharper anticolonial discourses, but Pacific historians, lulled by a mainly peaceful transition toward self-government, tended to use 1900 as a cut-off for research. The 1987 Fiji coups and other tensions in the postcolonial Pacific “jolted” the field into the present. As Howe observed, “The discipline’s post-war rejection of the imperial historical approach was all too zealous in that the study of colonial government itself, even if divorced from older imperial values, simply became unfashionable” (Howe 1994, xii).

This oversight ignored the adverse ways that colonial legacies continue to affect the Pacific, as they do Africa. Stewart Firth has noted, “the sovereignty of sovereign states has delivered less complete independence than might have been expected. The islands’ economies are weak; the Islanders’ expectations are high” (1989, 93). In 1994, Brij Lal surveyed the legacy of Islander-oriented historiography and felt a need to reiterate such issues as depopulation from disease, missionary assaults on indigenous values, and administrative meddling with native traditions: “Colonialism is ultimately about controlling and subjugating one group of people for the benefit of another. It is about an unequal, essentially exploitative relationship and, in the modern world, is marked with racial connotations” (Lal 1994, 444).<sup>5</sup>

I would like to reevaluate the agent–victim dichotomy by destabilizing the presumed meanings and relationships of its components. To do this, I will cross back and forth between other fields and Pacific history, because I believe that comparison exposes historiographies to each other, even if the process may seem to Pacific scholars to stray too far from their own area specialties. First, I want to separate *victim* from its hitchhiking adject-

tive, *passive*. That pairing is clearly polemical, because the unappealing attribute of passivity cleverly disqualifies victimization from consideration. *Victim* is already a heavily laden word. As I have shown, to proponents of Islander agency, the label *victim* implies helplessness, vulnerability, even tragic inadequacy, so that avoiding its use would seem to empower the subjects of study. But to others, *victim* clearly connotes innocence (hence injustice), which is a powerful political tool for claiming redress. It is not only chronology that places Trask's tale of rising militancy *after* her "done-to" version of postcontact Hawai'i. It is a kind of victim-turned-agent dialectic.<sup>6</sup>

"Victimhood" can be provocatively empowering. In Israel, for example, when a Jewish settler murdered Muslim worshippers in a Hebron mosque in 1994, both Palestinians and Jews claimed victimization. The Palestine Liberation Organization demanded better United Nations protection, but one offended Zionist settler shouted, "We must be the victims!" (Bartholet 1994, 35). In her study of Holocaust denial revisionism, Deborah Lipstadt stated, "If you devictimize a people you strip them of their moral authority" (1993, 7-8). One measure of this moral high ground is the defensive backlash *against* many claimants to victimization. Holocaust deniers argue that the survival of half a million Jews proves there was no genocide, no plan of extermination, only a removal project that went awry. They call the Holocaust a hoax designed to extort land and money from a guilty world for Israel: "The central assertion for the deniers is that Jews are not victims but victimizers" (Lipstadt 1993, 23).

George Will, a conservative columnist who is no fan of "collective guilt," has condemned "grievance groups," such as Black radicals, for "exploiting the coveted status as 'victims' (of America's wickedness) to claim special rights and entitlements" (Will 1993, 78). Men's Movement leader Jim Whinston has complained, "In this country, women are playing the victim role rather than getting out there and preparing themselves to be leaders" (quoted in Norris 1994, 3). Ironically, European expansionists themselves once used the victim image to justify their own agendas. For over a century, a marble statue on the steps of the Capitol building in Washington, DC, depicted a heroic male pioneer rescuing a helpless white woman and her baby from a tomahawk-wielding "savage" (Drinnon 1980, 120-121). Similar imaging may be found in the self-portrayals of some European missionaries and traders in the Pacific Islands.<sup>7</sup>

As I investigated this issue further, I found that there is actually an aca-

demic field called victimology, with a journal of the same name. The term was coined in 1937, when an American lawyer, Benjamin Mendelsohn, began to develop victim profiles from crime statistics. In the 1970s, a trend toward victim "advocacy" gave new impetus to such studies. Previously, the modern nation-state had made crime an offense against society, not against a victim deserving of compensation. Moreover, the American notion of "rugged individualism," with its social Darwinist rationale, tended to blame victims for their own victimization. American tradition preferred to treat criminals as misfits, not as symptoms of social problems, so that victims were simply "losers" in an otherwise just society. In fact, defendants have received more consideration than victims. Robert Elias, a human rights activist himself, saluted the role of women's and civil rights groups in broadening the "social reality of oppression" beyond narrow criminology. He wanted to reform a "political economy of helplessness" that privileges police power over social reform: "From being a victimology of the 'act' (of crime), it has increasingly become a victimology of 'action' which promotes, and not merely studies, victims" (Elias 1986, 22).

In such a discourse, being acted on unjustly requires compensatory counteraction. Supporters of victim advocacy define a victim as someone who has suffered a significant deprivation, which has an identifiable cause, which in turn entitles the sufferer to "social concern" (Bayley 1991, 53). Whereas victims were once dismissed as "passive actors," who often felt self-hatred and shame at their own powerlessness, they are increasingly seen as culturally defined. Feminists, for example, have redefined rape as sexual assault, because rape trials are notorious for accusing the victim of asking for it (Scherer 1982, 10-23). That image, of someone female purportedly inviting her own sexual exploitation, is particularly resonant in Pacific history, where island women were often in the front line of protocolonial contact (Chappell 1992). Despite Will's complaint about victim "privilege," African-Americans still blame institutional racism for making them "perpetual victims" (Dykes 1982, 76-77). A recent Afrocentric movement has pushed the origins of Black victimization back thousands of years, to a time when warlike white nomads supposedly drove civilized Africans out of Egypt.<sup>8</sup> By that standard, many of the first native settlers of the Pacific Islands were "victims" who had lost power struggles to rivals in their homelands. Or were they opportunistic fishers who became active agents of colonization on the undeveloped beaches they discovered?

A straightforward dictionary definition describes a victim as anyone who has been tricked, injured, or killed. The *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* adds the possibility that someone might become a victim "from some enterprise or pursuit voluntarily undertaken" (1967, 355), raising the question of whether a person has to be passive to experience victimization. For example, at the Battle of Omdurman in 1898, the British suffered only 123 casualties, while the Sudanese army of the Madhi lost 11,000. Clearly neither passivity nor lack of human dignity sent all those charging Muslims on their way to Paradise, but Maxim guns—a weapon they had never encountered before, a kind of technological trick. As an eyewitness wrote, "They were in a dense mass. . . . The ranges were known. It was a matter of machinery. . . . bullets were shearing through flesh, smashing and splintering bone; valiant men were struggling on through a hell of whistling metal, exploding shells, and spurting dust—suffering, despairing, dying" (Churchill 1962, 316–317).

Just as fatally active was the New Guinea big man who tested an Australian expedition by charging with his spear and shouting a challenge, only to be shot dead by the Leahy brothers (Connolly and Anderson 1983). His gesture, like that of the Sudanese dervishes, was potentially life-threatening: it forced the shooter to choose quickly whether to be a victim or a victimizer. But what of Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III, who on "Black Saturday" in Apia in 1929 was machine-gunned by New Zealand police as he called out for peace? Was he an agent or a victim? After being stripped of his title and banished from his village (for planting a hibiscus hedge) by an arbitrary military governor, he became an active but nonviolent Mau leader, only to be victimized by colonial weaponry and then made into a martyr of "passive resistance" (Field 1984).

Resistance historiography in the Pacific Islands has cross-fertilized with its African and Southeast Asian counterparts. This interaction has yielded more flexibility and subtlety in definitions of resistance, or protest, which may be active or passive, in varying combinations, depending on the context (See Hempenstall and Rutherford 1984, 1–4). James Scott, for example, has done important work in detecting "everyday forms of peasant resistance" in Malaysia—tactics of defiance that may seem on the surface to be very passive but nevertheless manage to renegotiate power relations (Scott 1985, xvi). "Lazy natives" were thus more than racial stereotypes; they were powerless resisters who tested the limits of non-cooperation with colonialism.<sup>9</sup> Doug Munro, building on the work of Brij Lal, has argued that passivity on Pacific plantations was often the way to

survive in an oppressive situation, so that "accommodation" itself could be a form of "resistance": "The silence of the oppressed and their lack of action . . . should not be taken to imply indifference to or satisfaction with the status quo" (Munro 1993b, 25). The very principle of civil disobedience, as developed by Mahatma Gandhi, was built on passive aggressiveness, to produce public victimization, colonial guilt, and ultimate victory. As journalist Webb Miller wrote of the 1930 march on the Dharsana Salt Works, "Not one of the marchers even raised an arm to fend off the blows. . . . The survivors, without breaking ranks, silently and doggedly marched on until struck down" (quoted in Fischer 1954, 101).

Active protesters may thus affect to be passive in order to discredit authority. This is action of a special kind, perhaps a peak, self-actualizing experience. A psychological discourse is devoted to the "altruistic personality," whose prototype is based on people who endangered their own lives to protect Jews from the Nazis. What type of agent would risk self-victimization by rescuing "others"? Apparently, it is a personality with a highly developed sense of idealism that forces one to do one's moral duty. That inner discipline makes altruism "agent-centered," as opposed to "consequence-centered" (Oliner 1992, 30-31). But how does one acquire a concept of duty except by training? Volition can be a very elusive phenomenon, because the reasons people do what they do are an outcome of both self-definition and socialization.

The often-fuzzy boundary between doing and undergoing can make it hard "to single out actions" (Thalberg 1972, 18, 49). Jerome Segal has written of a "structural web of agency," in which "agency is a union of self and action." Alienation is thus a realization that people have lost control of their lives and become "unintelligible" to themselves (Segal 1991, 245-250). Yet collective unintelligibility implies consensus. Anthony Giddens has described a process called "structuration," in which human agents, consciously or unconsciously, shape the structures that encompass their actions: "the personal, transient encounters of daily life cannot be conceptually separated from the long-term development of institutions" (1982, 8-11). Michel Foucault provided a corollary: "men enter into communication and find themselves in the already constructed network of comprehension" (1973, 331). Perhaps, then, "agency" can be separated from "active" in an overt sense?

Individual agents and social structures tend to implicate each other in



very compromising ways. Even those who perform others' commands are "not the passive objects of the power relation [but] actors, since those who obey carry out the required action themselves" (Luttwak 1976, 197). Adolf Eichmann was executed because following immoral orders was considered to be an immoral act: it passed victimization on to someone more helpless. Although typecast as so "terribly and terrifyingly normal" that he "commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong," Eichmann was held accountable for carrying out orders. Hannah Arendt wrote of the arch-victimizer, "there is an abyss between the actuality of what you did and the potentiality of what others might have done" (1963, 276–278). Tupua Tamasese was an actor-victim of a different sort: he might have sought safety, but instead he exposed himself to machine-gun fire in the open. He bore the role of a traditional *matai* 'titled chief' and Mau leader who wanted to restore a just political order, peacefully. Like texts that bear traces of their predecessors, the role of individuals in their cultural context is "simultaneously active and passive" (Derrida 1981, 26–27). Automatically privileging agency as an empowering device is thus problematic, because the process in question might well combine various degrees of action, passivity, and victimization.

Several historiographies have tried to grapple with the challenge of portraying both the human dignity of their subjects and the inhumane actions of harmful oppressors. In the field of American slavery, for example, an emphasis on the unjust treatment of African captives has been hard to reconcile with celebrations of the resilience of "slave culture."<sup>10</sup> Both approaches have their altruistic aspects, but as Willie Lee Rose has stated, "Some historians have tried to have it both ways, describing a totally dehumanizing institution that dehumanized nobody" (Rose 1982, 31). Historians of the Nazi Holocaust have had to contend with dissension among the survivors—those who wanted the horrors to be recorded, and those who had resisted and therefore resented the martyr narrative: "they wished to transform the image of Jews as only suffering victims, as only passive objects of German destructiveness. They wanted to rectify the historical account . . . with a record of active heroism" (Davidowicz 1981, 131). Yet Raul Hilberg has recently written about perpetrators, victims, and bystanders, keeping those categories distinct and demoting resisters to a subcategory of "unadjusted" victims, because Jewish councils had chosen a strategy of accommodation (1992, 177).



Feminist reconstructions of the past have provoked disagreement between prehistorians of matriarchy and chroniclers of patriarchy. Gerda Lerner has addressed this dilemma:

Once we abandon the concept of women as historical victims, acted upon by violent men . . . we must explain the central puzzle—woman's participation in the construction of the system that subordinates her. I suggest that abandoning the search for an empowering past—the search for matriarchy—is the first step in the right direction. The creation of compensatory myths of the distant past of women will not emancipate women in the present and the future (1986, 36).

Lerner has pursued agency to the point where "it might have come to pass that women agreed to a sexual division of labor, which would eventually disadvantage them, without having been able to foresee the later consequences" (1986, 50–52). Out of context, Lerner's statement might be interpreted as blaming the victim. Yet she is a committed feminist, as well as a conscientious historian. Should we classify what she is describing as passive agency?

In order to highlight the contradictions embedded in the victim–agent dichotomy, it is perhaps appropriate here to quote Trigger again, this time in full "confusion," with the subclauses I omitted the first time (in italics):

It is tempting to portray native North Americans in sombre tones as the victims of unremitting European self-interest. *To some degree this view is a necessary antidote to a long-standing tendency of historians to minimize the moral responsibility of European settlers for the sufferings of native peoples.* Yet such a view fails to acknowledge the tenacity with which native peoples, in the face of increasingly unequal odds, continued to defend their lands, customs, and personal dignity, *despite a spiralling death rate, growing economic dependence, and unrelenting efforts of Europeans to control every aspect of their lives.* This behaviour constitutes a record of continuing resourcefulness and adaptability *under conditions of stress that had never been paralleled in North America in prehistoric times or at any time in the history of most other people.* (Trigger 1985, 297, my italics)

This seemingly Janus-faced quotation combines subtexts of fatal impact, imperial domination, active resistance, economic dependency, axial change, and native persistence, despite the odds. One might say, what a mess! Yet the reality he has tried to portray is clearly too multifaceted to be encompassed by a simple binary agent–victim construct. Perhaps

Marx's old dictum that people "make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please" (1963, 15) says it all. Everyone is acted on every day, no matter how independent they may pretend to be. Victims need not be passive, nor the passive weak, nor actors free agents, for history to happen. Part of the problem lies in reifying such categories into timeless states: once a victim, always a victim, for example (or at least until the victim-turned-agent dialectic kicks in).

It is quite possible to speak of agency and victimization in the same breath, because those attributes are entangled and mutable, not discrete. For example, Banabans and Bikinians could be shown to be victims because they lost their islands, but they also made choices along the way, however misguided. Their plight is reminiscent of what Clive Moore once said about contract laborers: their actions might seem mostly voluntary, but they were nevertheless victims of "cultural kidnapping," because recruiters knew better than the recruits what they were in for (1985, 47). Moore has recently argued that Australian National University "revisionism" never did form a coherent school of thought; both agency and victimization are provable, depending on what a scholar chooses to emphasize (Moore 1992).

This analytic flexibility is detectable in the writing of some Islander historians, such as Vicente Diaz, who has argued eloquently that Chamorros are not extinct and that Spanish customs and Catholicism are no longer colonial impositions but syncretized symbols of un-American identity. In the same sentence, Diaz has combined motifs of both agency and oppression: "Other nations and governments may have claimed political sovereignty over Guam, but Chamorros always maintained a level of control over their identity and their lands, always, that is, until the horrors of World War II and its aftermath, especially the past two decades" (1994, 53). This scenario, if subjected to the old dichotomy, would sound like an agent-turned-victim chronology. But Diaz's work is not so simplistic.

Nor is that of Mālama Meleiseā and others. Meleiseā has parodied Marxists as new missionaries out to save Pacific Islanders from an external world system and internal despotism (1987, 152). Yet, commenting on the Samoan chapter in Howe (1984), Meleiseā warned, "The new historiography is in danger of promoting a new orthodoxy, if it tries to diminish the tragic consequences of land grabbing, king-making, and gunboat diplomacy by Europeans in destroying the political capacities of Islanders to respond on equal terms" (Meleiseā 1985, 149). Jonathan

Osorio, a Hawaiian Studies professor, has cautioned a colleague for letting the *ali'i* 'chiefs' off the hook a bit too easily in her study of the Mahele: "if Kamehameha III was a victim, he was still *mō'i* [king], and therefore responsible for the *maka'āinana* [commoner] welfare" (Osorio 1994, 235). Epeli Hau'ofa has criticized modern Pacific ruling elites (1987, 11), but he has also reaffirmed grassroots agency among out-migrants, who are providing for future generations by reversing presumed cores and peripheries in their "sea of islands" (1994, 160).

If native Islanders are capable of such "messiness" in their historiography, surely the people who invented academic history should be. Are academics so limited in skill that they have to choose between only two archetypes: either "happy campers" who manipulated foreign guests until they moved on, or helpless prey for brutal aliens and germs? This artificial dichotomy has made it difficult to negotiate intellectual decolonization—a dilemma that contributes to the ethnic polarization of academic and nationalist history. Agents and victims are not mutually exclusive categories but contextually signified roles. How can a single paradigm encompass the shooting of Tupua Tamasese as he protested for sovereignty, and also the outmigration of so many Western Samoans now that they *have* independence?

Even "fatal impact" deserves a second look, because polemics have prevented Pacific historians from dealing adequately with disease. Fatality is not the same as totality, though it sounds almost as gloomy. While most native peoples may have survived introduced epidemics in the long run and therefore have claims to identity in the modern world, those diseases were no less fatal to the dead, the significance of whose passing, often en masse, awaits careful analysis. The political implications of introduced diseases have led some scholars either to dismiss mass depopulation as a myth or to make depopulation the primary reason that natives lost their sovereignty—because of their resulting dependence on foreign missionary advisers.<sup>11</sup> Should modern historians avoid fresh investigations of this difficult issue simply because the evidence might challenge their mental constructs—that is, because germs can produce victims?

The real challenge for "postcolonial" Pacific Island historians is to be conscious of and address contradictions in our narratives, because interpretations of the past are not amenable to clear-cut, eternal paradigms. Moreover, as Howe has observed, "The days of the cosy homogeneity, indeed hegemony, of the ANU school of island-centred culture contact

studies are long gone" (1992, 229). The field should be open enough to offer a "middle ground" of interaction, not one of wishy-washy compromises but of enriched debate. As Richard White has written of Native Americans, "They are people who for a long time resolutely fought the European tendency to create them as the other. They asserted a separate identity, but they also claimed a common humanity in a shared world [which was] a joint Indian-white creation" (1991, xiv). He said that middle ground was a theater of symbolic interchanges, where the basis of communication was continually renegotiated, not codified into only one side's vision. It was not always peaceful, but it functioned until intensified white settlement overwhelmed it.

The agendas of Islander nationalists should tell the scholarly community that there is still unfinished business that needs addressing. In the aftermath of the 1987 Fiji coups, for example, Asesea Ravuvu (1991) attacked the sacred cow of western democracy as an alien imposition on Fijian chiefly traditions. Historians might well argue that those "traditions" were altered by British administrative restructuring or that Ravuvu, a *kai colo* 'hill tribesman', had previously been critical of the eastern chiefly establishment.<sup>12</sup> But the sentiments represented by his thesis will not simply go away because academics dispute it. Nationalist revisionism openly challenges the lingering Eurocentrism embedded in western scholarly methodologies. This revolt is particularly vocal in Pacific Island states where the indigenous people feel the threat of "ethnocide" because they are outnumbered today by immigrant populations—which so far have produced the majority of Pacific Island historians.

Trask is not alone in her anger. Jean-Marie Tjibaou protested the "anonymity" imposed by French colonialism on the Kanak people, who deserved their "place in the sun" (Tjibaou 1978, 5). Ranginui Walker has lamented the "stolen humanity" of New Zealand Maori: "theirs is a struggle without end into the world of light" (1990, 287). Clearly, the "gift" of past agency has not erased the pain of victimization. Walker has reminded us that in reciprocity-based societies, just compensation for wrongs committed is essential for harmony (1990, 69). That ethos is what made Chief Tiramorehu prophetic in 1848, when he noted that English settlers were not leaving the Maori enough land to prosper on. "We shall never cease complaining," he vowed, "to the white people who may hereafter come here" (Walker 1990, 108). His form of *utu* 'payback' still haunts Pacific history, because privileging Islander agency can erase

victimhood—and even project back onto natives culpability, the focus of western criminal law (Elias 1986).<sup>13</sup>

A truly “island-centered” historiography requires more than talking about past Islanders. It also demands hearing native voices in the present and future, even if their concerns may subvert historians’ lofty paradigms. James Clifford (1992) has said that he prefers utopic rather than dystopic (tragic) emplotments.<sup>14</sup> All historians make that kind of choice in their work, but to go a step further and prescribe a “correct” paradigm for doing history would not be *postcolonial*. Personally, I prefer a tool-kit approach: because the problems of evidence are often unpredictable; it pays to have more than one wrench. Both “culture contact” and anticolonial discourse could provide analytic insights. As Pacific Island histories multiply and diversify, historians should evolve away from the opening format at the 1994 Pacific History Association Conference in Kiribati, where most of the Islanders present sat around the periphery of the scholars’ roundtable, as if anthropologically watching academics dissect the past. Until its practitioners learn to work in a multivocal middle ground, the decolonization of Pacific history is likely to remain an unfinished epiphany.

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## Notes

1 Compare Wallerstein 1960 with his 1966 position.

2 Even imperial history has recently accorded colonies as dynamic a role as core metropolitan centers. See Bailyn and Morgan (1991, 9).

3 Doug Munro (1993a, 98–99), in an overview of labor trade historiography, has argued that Panoff and “Canberra” scholars, notably Stewart Firth, disagreed in far more than semantic ways. Panoff’s approach was so oppositional that he presented an alternative paradigm, based on evidence from German New Guinea.

4 Keesing (1989) evoked a rebuttal from Trask (1991), a mediation from Jolly (1992), and further comment in Keesing (1992), chapters 22–24 in particular.

5 Howe, Firth, and Lal have also been seen, earlier in their distinguished careers, as representative of the “Canberra school.” This shows not only that their contributions stand above simplistic classifications, but also that their views have evolved.

6 This scenario has also been followed in John Bodley (1990). He has admitted to portraying “tribal” peoples “largely as passive victims, except for episodes of armed resistance,” until they were suddenly reborn in the 1970s as “indigenous” groups seeking their right to self-determination (152). His study was first researched and written in the 1970s.

7 For example, the invocation of gunboat diplomacy by John Paton after his flight from Tanna in 1862 (Adams 1984, 150–167), or the complaints by British and German traders in Tonga in 1910 against a competing native cooperative (Hempenstall and Rutherford 1984, 49–66).

8 Much of the historiography of this movement derives from the writings of Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal, who argued in the 1950s that ancient Egyptians were Black (1974). An African-American counterpart was Chancellor Williams (1987), among others.

9 They could even be considered victims of self-fulfilling colonial discrimination. See Alatas 1977.

10 The extremes are represented by Stanley Elkins, whose work reflected studies on Nazi concentration camp victims, and John Blassingame, who described “slave community” resilience. For a useful historiographic overview, see Peter Parish 1989.

11 Compare Norma McArthur’s 1967 generalizations, which tend to contradict her own case studies, with Lilikalā Kame‘eleihiwa’s eloquent study of the Hawaiian Mahele (1992, especially 316–317).

12 See Timothy Macnaught 1982 and Ravuvu 1987.

13 Blaming the would-be victim replicates imperial historiographies that used Islander “flaws” to justify colonialism. Such blaming explains why nationalists are wary of any criticisms of their chiefs or of allegations that infanticide, power abuses, or wars contributed to native depopulation as much as alien diseases did. In a recent book on “genocide” in Hawai‘i, O A Bushnell (1993) acknowledged the impact of introduced epidemics but then accused Hawaiians, through their customary practices, of worsening the crisis and committing demographic *sui-cide*, despite his admitted lack of sound evidence (293).

14 Clifford made this comment in response to a question from the audience that accused him of conservatism.

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## Abstract

Pacific history claims to have decolonized by focusing on Islanders as active agents who made participatory choices in their interactions with outsiders. "Islander-oriented" studies are a decided improvement over imperial histories, but modern revisionism has tended to downplay evidence of depopulation, cultural domination, or colonial exploitation, on the basis that such narratives rob Islanders of their dignity by representing them as "passive victims" being acted on by outsiders. This polemicism still decides *for* Islanders what is important about their past. Nationalists often emphasize injustices committed against their peoples. Such active modern agents discourse about victimization to portray not helplessness but innocence, and the need for redress. This dilemma reveals the need to revise Pacific history's dominant paradigm: victims need not be passive, and actors tend to be embedded in structures.